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ABSTRACT

A study involving 59 undergraduate speech communication students investigated relationships between intelligence, understanding of editorial satire, and appreciation of satire. The students were asked to read three satirical essays and then to pick one of five statements that best described the thesis as intended by the author. Then each satire was rated on a seven-step scale from "extremely funny" to "extremely unfunny." Analysis of variance indicated that better understanding of satire was significantly associated with higher Scholastic Aptitude Test verbal (but not quantitative) scores. Funniness ratings were significantly correlated with verbal SAT scores and with understanding of a satirical intent for only one of the three essays used. (TJ)

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INTELLIGENCE: A FACTOR IN THE UNDERSTANDING AND APPRECIATION OF EDITORIAL SATIRE

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INTELLIGENCE: A FACTOR IN THE UNDERSTANDING AND APPRECIATION OF EDITORIAL SATIRE

Average SAT verbal scores differentiated groups based upon their ability to correctly point out the theses of satires. For one of the three satires used, the ability to comprehend the thesis and higher verbal SAT scores were related to higher ratings on funniness.

Experimental studies of satirical stimuli as persuasion indicate at least two generalizations: (1) satire, whether in the form of editorial cartoon, satirical speech, or verbal editorial can be persuasive if the audience of the satire understands the serious thesis intended by the satirist, but (2) satirical stimuli are such that the audience often misses the serious point of the satirist(s).[1] For instance, this latter point is highlighted by studies conducted by Carl and Gruner.

Carl[2] exposed subjects to political cartoons current at the time and found that fully 70% of the time the subjects were completely wrong in stating the cartoonists' theses. Only 15% of the time were subjects completely correct, with another 15% of cases in which they were "close." A replication in a highly educated area (Ithaca, N.Y.) showed little improvement (62% wrong, 22% correct, 15% "close").

Gruner[3] exposed college freshmen to a speech satirizing the concept of "censorhip," but only 12 of 129 could pick from a list of statements the thesis intended by the speaker. Another study by Gruner[4] found that Art Buchwald editorial satires produced statistically significant attitude shift, but only when the subjects who read them were "artificially" supplied with the writer's intended theses. Subjects in the control condition, who were <u>not</u> told the writer's theses, did not change in attitude; many of these subjects did <u>not</u> perceive the writer's theses on their own.

If people do not or cannot understand the serious point of satire, researchers and practitioners should be interested in <u>why</u> this is so. An early study by Cooper and Jahoda[5] found that, in the case of satire directed against prejudice, bigotted people used a number of psychological defense mechanisms to protect themselves against understanding the anti-prejudice message. Since the role that attitudes play in

selectivity of perception is such a well-known psychological phenomenon, Cooper and Jahoda's results are not suprising. Nor is it surprising that political attitudes affect such perception. Gruner[6] has subsequently found that adherents of then-President Richard Nixon were significantly less able to perceive the thesis of an anti-Nixon satire than were followers of his 1972 opponent, George McGovern.

Social and political attitudes are often influenced by general personality/emotional traits, such as open- or closed-mindedness. Hypothesizing that this trait would influence the perception of visual humor, Miller and Bacon[7] had open- and closed-minded subjects view a Playboy cartoon (a nude woman with a "reverse" sun tan---tan where a swimsuit should go, pale where it would not be) and timed them with a stopwatch until they "got the point." Closed-minded subjects took a significantly longer time in perceiving the humorous point.

In another study, this time involving satire, Gruner[8] measured subjects' dogmatism with a short-form scale developed for field studies, then had them read three editorial satires and for each pick from a list of statements that thesis intended by the writer. The average dogmatism scores of those correct in identifying all three, only two of three, only 1 of three, and none of the three were tested for statistically significant difference by a one-way analysis of variance. The resulting F was statistically significant. The most dogmatic were those unable to pick a single correct thesis; the next most dogmatic group were correct in one of three satires; the next most dogmatic group were correct two out of three times; the least dogmatic were correct on all three.

With particular content-bound social and/or political attitudes and the general trait of dogmatism identified as factors in the perception of satirical theses, the present study turned to the question of whether the understanding and/or appreciation of editorial satire is influenced by intelligence. Null hypotheses tested were:

1. Verbal intelligence (verbal SAT scores) will not be a factor in the understanding of editorial satires.
2. Quantitative intelligence (quantitative SAT scores) will not be a factor in the understanding of editorial satires.

3. The understanding of editorial satires will not affect the rated funniness of those satires.

4. Verbal intelligence will not be related to rated funniness of editorial satires.

Procedures

Stimuli. Three satirical editorials, one by Art Hoppe and two by Art Buchwald, were used as the stimuli for this study. The Hoppe piece, "SANE Capital Punishment," as published in The Daily Nebraskan (University of Nebraska, Lincoln) of April 24, 1967, argued satirically that "capital punishment is no deterrent to murder." Buchwald's "Upping Prison Requirements"[9] ridiculed a reply of then-Governor of Georgia, Lester Maddox, to criticism of Georgia prison reform: "We're doing the best we can, and before we do much better, we're going to have to get a better grade of prisoner." The other Buchwald piece, "Try to Find the Perfect Employee," (as published in the Atlanta Journal 5-25-75) made fun of the ridiculous extent to which government is interfering in the hiring of employees by private companies. The thesis intended in each satire was verified by the authors.[10]

Data-gathering. Subjects were 59 undergraduate speech communication students at the University of Georgia during Winter Quarter, 1978. The three satires were reproduced and stapled together. To prevent an order effect the satires were arranged so that each was 1st, 2nd, and 3rd in order 1/3 of the time each. Subjects were handed the booklets and asked to read each "essay" and to respond to the test and evaluational material following each. After each satire was a list of five statements from which the subject was to pick the correct thesis as intended by the author. Each satire was then rated on a seven-step semantic differential-type scale bordered by "extremely funny" and "extremely unfunny," a scale used often in previous research.

Each subject's SAT verbal and quantitative scores submitted for entrance to the University was secured from the Admission Office's Orientation Placement Report.

Data Analysis. The first step was to divide the subjects' responses into four groups based upon whether they correctly identified the thesis of all 3, of only 2, of only 1, or none of the three satires. Then the mean verbal and quantitative scores

of the four groups were tested for significance of difference among them with a one-way analysis of variance. This was to test hypotheses 1 and 2.

To test hypothesis 3, concerning whether rated funniness of satires will be affected by whether subjects understood them, *t*-tests were run for each satire on the funniness ratings of those who did vs. those who did not check the correct thesis of that satire.

To test hypothesis 4 regarding intelligence and rated funniness of satire, Pearson *r*'s were computed between verbal SAT scores and humor ratings for each satire.

Results. Results of the two one-way analyses of variance are presented in Table 1. Group 0 comprised subjects who were not correct on any of the three satire theses; Group 1 contained those correct on one of the three; Group 2 subjects were correct on two out of three; and Group 3 subjects were correct on all three theses.

Table 1

Comparison of SAT Mean Scores for Four Groups

Group:	0 (n = 4)	1 (n = 16)	2 (n = 24)	3 (n = 15)	
Mean SAT Verbal	400	458	470	537	$F = 3.69$, $p < .05$
Mean SAT Quan.	475	546	523	526	$F = .98$ NS

As the table shows, mean SAT verbal scores rise fairly regularly from Group 0 to Group 3, and the significant F shows that these differences among groups are not due to chance alone. The SAT quantitative scores, however, show no such regularity of difference (which was as expected), and the non-significant F shows that what differences there are are due to chance alone.

Table 2 shows the results for each satire of the *t*-tests between the funniness ratings of those subjects who did and those who did not check the correct thesis of that satire. As the table shows, the mean funniness ratings of those who did and those who did not check the correct thesis differed a significant amount for only one satire, "Try To Find the Perfect Employee."

Table 2

Mean Funniness Ratings by Those Understanding and Not Understanding the Satires

	Understanding		Not Understanding		t
Satire:	Mean	N	Mean	N	
Try to Find...	5.058	52	3.429	7	2.76, $p < .01$
SANE Capital Punishment	5.200	20	4.974	39	.85 NS
Upping Prison Requirements	5.622	37	5.364	22	.97 NS

The correlations between the verbal SAT scores and funniness ratings of each satire appear in Table 3. Only one was statistically significant.

Table 3

Pearson r's Between Verbal SAT Scores and Funniness Ratings

Satire:	r	Significance
Try to Find ...	+.273	$p < .05$
SANE Cap. Pun.	+.246	$.05 < p < .10$
Upping Prison Req.	-.115	NS

Conclusions

It appears obvious from the data of Table 1 that null hypothesis #1 can be rejected and that null hypothesis #2 can be retained. The effect of verbal intelligence, as measured by the SAT (even in the restricted range of those admitted to a major university by those scores) clearly seems to affect the ability to correctly perceive the intended thesis of editorial satires; it seems equally as clear that quantitative intelligence as measured by the SAT probably does not affect that ability.

The data of Table 2 rejects null hypothesis #3 in one case and argues acceptance in two others. In one of the three satires the ability to perceive the correct thesis definitely seems to have raised the funniness ratings of the satire; in the other two cases the differences were in the same direction, but quite small and not significant, statistically. A tentative conclusion might be that whether understanding a satire's point affects appreciation of that satire depends upon the content (and, maybe the style) of the satire and its interaction with the reader's previous attitudes and knowledge regarding that content.

Table 3 reveals data reflecting ambivalency toward null hypothesis #4. For one satire intelligence was slightly (but statistically significantly) related to satire appreciation; in a second it was slightly less related and not quite significantly (at the .05 level) related; in a third it was negatively (but not significantly) related.

This writer is intrigued by the fact that the only significant statistical results regarding hypotheses #'s 3 and 4 occurred with the same editorial satire, Buchwald's "Try to Find the Perfect Employee." The data from Tables 2 and 3 together suggest that reaction to satire is probably bound in some way to either the content or the style (or both) of any particular satire. Future research should gather data and analyze it in time to interview in depth the subjects before they become unavailable; such interviews, based upon the analyzed data, might reveal important insights into the perception of satire which could become the hypotheses for more sophisticated studies in the future.[11]

Footnotes

[1]These studies are summarized in Charles R. Gruner, Understanding Laughter: The Workings of Wit and Humor (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Co., 1979); a briefer summary appears in Charles R. Gruner, "Wit and Humour in Mass Communication," In A. Chapman and H. Foot, eds., Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research, and Applications (London: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 1976).

[2]LeRoy M. Carl., "Editorial Cartoons Fail to Reach Many Readers," Journalism Quarterly, 45:633-5 (1968).

[3]Charles R. Gruner, "An Experimental Study of Satire as Persuasion," Speech Monographs, 32:149-53 (1965).

[4]Charles R. Gruner, "Editorial Satire as Persuasion: An Experiment," Journalism Quarterly, 44:727-30 (1967).

[5]Eunice Cooper and Marie Jahoda, "The Evasion of Propaganda: How Prejudiced People Respond to Anti-Prejudice Propaganda," Journal of Psychology, 23:15-25 (1947).

[6]Charles R. Gruner, "Satire as a Reinforcer of Attitudes," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association's annual convention, Dec. 28, 1972, Chicago.

[7]Gerald R. Miller and Paula Bacon, "Open- and Closed-Mindedness and Recognition of Visual Humor," Journal of Communication, 21:150-59 (1971).

[8]Charles R. Gruner, "Dogmatism: A Factor in the Understanding and Appreciation of Satire," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association's annual convention, Dec. 29, 1974, San Francisco.

[9]Reprinted in Art Buchwald, 'The Establishment is Alive and Well in Washington (New York: Fawcett, 1970), pp. 17-18.

[10]Interested parties may receive copies of the three stimuli by writing directly to the author of this article.

[11]For instance, McCroskey found persuasion resulting from one speech with "good" evidence but no persuasion resulting from another speech with equally "good" evidence. Follow-up interviews uncovered the fact that the ineffective speech's evidence, while "good," was already known to the subjects, whereas the evidence in the effective persuasive speech was "brand new" to them. See James C. McCroskey, "A Summary of Experimental Research on the Effects of Evidence in Persuasive Communication," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 55:169-76 (1969).